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DEFENSE ISSUES

As the Department of Defense continues to grapple with shrinking budgets and fewer personnel, the adage "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" remains an integral part of DoD's safety program.

Volume 13 Number 24

Safety Remains a Top Priority in Today's Military

Prepared remarks of Sherri W. Goodman, deputy undersecretary of defense for environmental security, at the Defense Agency Safety and Occupational Health Symposium, Fort Belvoir, Va., Feb. 17, 1998.

Good morning! Safety in the Department of Defense has a long history, dating back to the Revolutionary War. One of the very first orders issued by Gen. Washington simply read, "No smoking in powder tents." This was also the first safety regulation for the U.S. military.

Several hundred years later, I had the honor of being appointed the deputy undersecretary of defense for environmental security. Accordingly, I am responsible for developing policies to protect the health, safety and environment of all military and civilian personnel, their families and people who live adjacent to our facilities.

In a nutshell, this involves making sure that the department manages the natural areas under our jurisdiction, cleans up sites that have been contaminated in the past, develops programs and technologies to prevent pollution from the outset, protects the health and safety of people, and complies with the law. But above and beyond all else, protecting the health and safety of our people is Job 1. It is our highest priority.

One of the very first policies I personally championed through the corridors of the Pentagon expanded the one that Gen. Washington signed. The new policy prohibited smoking not just in powder tents, but in all DoD facilities. The amount of effort we expended creating this policy made me wish that Gen. Washington had tacked it on to his regulation in the first place.

Every person who works for the Defense Department has the inherent right to work and live in a safe and healthful environment. This should be a core value of the department's culture. Feeling, and being, safe should permeate every task and every organization within the Department.

On July 2, 1997, Secretary of Defense [William S.] Cohen signed the FY 1999-2003 Defense Planning Guidance, which states: "Safety and Health. Fund risk management strategies towards achieving a near term goal of zero Class A accidents, with the ultimate goal of zero total accidents, no occupational injuries and illnesses, and full compliance with DoD health and safety standards. Fund ergonomics program initiatives to reduce work related musculoskeletal disorders and associated costs."

Note that this is the first time that there has been a specific and separate section on safety and occupational health in the DPG and the inclusion of the DoD accident prevention goal.

Under the Defense Reform Initiative, the department will restructure itself to function similar to top performing world class organizations. That is why we have arranged for Mr. Gerry Scannel to be the luncheon speaker tomorrow. While best known to most Americans as the assistant secretary of labor heading the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, or the president of the National Safety Council, Mr. Scannel is best known within the safety and occupational health profession as one of the most successful practitioners of the art of prevention. We are confident that his ideas will help us as we proceed with the DRI.

But why do we even need to address SOH in the DRI? Wasn't modern industrial safety and health virtually invented by the U.S. military? It is true during World War II people and resources were in short supply and our collective future hinged on producing the vast quantities of war materiel needed to defeat our enemies. The loss of an ammunition plant or fire in an aircraft factory could have very real impacts on those who needed the products of these efforts. Similarly, personnel shortages dictated that the workers who produced the materiel needed to be protected as well.

We became a world leader in safety and health. We are still leaders in many areas, but in more than a few cases, the competition has caught up and even passed us. Under the DRI, we will re-examine where we are going and how we will get there.

As Secretary Cohen has said, "I know that everyone in the department takes accident prevention seriously, and that we can do better." In fact, Defense Secretary Cohen has shown a personal interest and commitment to work force safety. Following a series of accidents in September, Secretary Cohen ordered the first-ever departmentwide, 24-hour aviation stand-down. In a press statement released during this stand-down the secretary said, "Perfection is impossible, but that is our goal for aviation safety."

President Clinton and Secretary Cohen speak with one voice on this issue. In his State of the Union address a few weeks ago, he said improving worker health, safety and environmental standards are a priority this year, and a few days later at the National Defense University, Clinton said, "Every year, about 200 soldiers, airmen and Marines die in peacetime accidents. I think that the American people need to know that. We must and will always make safety a top priority. Every casualty is a tragedy, in peace or in war."

This commitment from the top provides a unique opportunity to make the institutional changes needed to improve the safety and occupational health of the DoD work force. Why does the department need to make fundamental institutional changes? Some are content with the current performance, which is slightly better than the federal average for injuring workers. But those content with this performance are neither the ones being injured or the ones that must pay the \$600 million in workers' compensation costs each year.

In fact, we are not getting any better, statistically speaking. This is troubling. And since we are shutting down or contracting out much of the blue collar industrial effort, that means that administrative workers may actually be losing ground.

And your agencies have a lot of workers. Taken together, the defense agencies are second only to U.S. Postal Service in total civil service population. We are here today to roll up our sleeves and collectively identify the direction and capability necessary to take on the SOH hurdles facing the defense agencies and by association, the department as a whole.

I like to say that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. But have you ever tried to weigh prevention? What does it look like? And how much is a "pound of cure"? Measuring our effectiveness and success is not easy.

The department knows when safety failures occur, but you can never measure an accident that never happened or cure an occupational illness that did not occur. But in these competitive times, when budgets are flat, we need to be able to measure our successes more than ever before. Therefore, I challenge you to establish a simple evaluation framework, and a series of indicators, to create measures that will improve your ability to perform your duties and communicate your future success.

Indicators such as accident rates are sometimes criticized as measures of failure. They are good indicators of past performance, but what do they tell us about the future? Predictive indicators are difficult to design and demand some creativity.

One member of my staff used a simple indicator when he augmented IG inspections. He randomly approached people in the hallways of buildings and asked directions to the safety office. In poorly

performing organizations, the responses often were snickers or a statements to the effect that they didn't even know if there were such an office. In well-performing organizations, he would get directions and, sometimes, an unsolicited testimonial about the importance of safety to the organization. What would he hear if he asked that question in your organization?

Top-level support is the foundation for the success of prevention programs. But how do you measure it? One indicator we occasionally see in industry and in the department is where the top manager decides to be briefed on every serious incident. Often, the first-line supervisor and the person who experienced the accident would brief the leader, or perhaps a group of senior leaders, to go over the cause and plan to prevent future incidents. Not surprisingly, accidents are rare in such organizations. Would you like to be the one who had to give such a briefing to your CEO [chief executive officer]? In this situation, a pound of fear may be worth an ounce of prevention. As you share your successes and challenges at this symposium, try to capture other indicators we can use and share.

There are 23 defense agencies represented here today. This is a unique opportunity to begin a collaborative, process by sharing the lessons you have learned, the challenges you face and the strategies you have employed to advance your programs. We have tried to create a forum where you can interact, share information and determine your needs.

Of course, your needs may vary by organization. We should also be careful to set reasonable expectations, based on an honest assessment of the strengths and limitations of your organization. Setting the bar too high can be paralyzing. We hope that you will come away from this seminar with measurable, cost-effective ways to step forward to improve your SOH programs.

Never be complacent, maintain continual awareness, make sure the secretary's commitment to safety results in raised safety awareness within your organization. Those who wish to cut corners involving the safety of the workers should be reminded of the time-proven piece of wisdom: "The cost of safety is much more easily sustained than the price paid for the lack of it."

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you. Have a safe and productive symposium.

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